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How 'verified accounts' on X fuelled far-right riots in the UK

LSE's Beatriz Lopes Buarque explains how her research into the role of X in the UK riots of summer 2024 indicated that accounts that had been 'verified' by the platform played a significant part in spreading content that incited violence.

'Verified accounts' on social network X played a pivotal role in inciting the anti-migrant and anti-Muslim violence that erupted across multiple UK towns and cities in summer 2024, my recent research showed. In addition to X-owner Elon Musk's account, which operated as a "**personal algorithm booster**" due to its large number of followers and its blue checkmark that indicates 'verified' status, **several others benefitted from the new verification system** – that replaced the "active, notable, and authentic criteria" with a paid subscription model – to amplify posts containing xenophobic and Islamophobic messages often conflated with mis/disinformation. **Evidence submitted to the UK Parliament in February 2025** indicates that tweets containing false information about the identity of the perpetrator of the horrifying stabbing attack that killed **three young children at a Taylor Swift-themed dance event** in Southport became viral when reproduced by verified accounts, fuelling the process of **mass radicalisation that culminated in the riots**.

Changes to the meaning of 'verified accounts' on X

When the blue checkmark was introduced on X (former Twitter), it functioned as a marker of authenticity and credibility, signalling to users that the account had passed mandatory ID-verification checks. For many years, having a blue checkmark symbolically indicated membership in an exclusive group of notable people—those who sat in the global "**VIP section**". This exceptionalism changed with the commodification of checkmarks in 2022.

Under Elon Musk, checkmarks became available to anyone willing to pay for a subscription. The platform's website emphasises the change in the meaning of the blue checkmark. Whereas in the past it conveyed the idea that the account had undergone a "**review to confirm that it met the active**,

notable, and authentic criteria", it now simply indicates an active subscription to X Premium. Given that the checkmark's visual design remained unchanged, many people may continue to attribute credibility and authenticity to verified accounts, making them particularly vulnerable to mis/disinformation. Although users must meet eligibility criteria to receive the blue checkmark that include no sign of usage of the platform for deception, identity verification is restricted to a confirmed phone number, turning the platform into a **hotbed for scams** and mis/disinformation.

The role of verified accounts in spreading mis/disinformation and inciting violence

Funded by the LSE Urgency Grant Scheme and hosted by the LSE Department of Media and Communications, I examined the posts shared by one of the main X verified accounts that incited violence in the aftermath of the Southport attack, and identified 23 additional verified accounts actively expressing xenophobic and Islamophobic ideas, often under the form of conspiracy theories, and occasionally inciting violence.

The account that served as a point of departure for my analysis one of the first to spread false information about who carried out the Southport attack, and it has been consistently engaged in a **"coordinated influence operation"** based on disinformation and hateful narratives about migrants and Muslims. This verified X account **had over 43,000 followers in August 2024** and was categorised as "Media & News." Since November 2024, the account has remained active under a different username but with the same logo design, "Media & News" categorisation, and blue checkmark. At present, the owner and origins of the account are unknown. However, given its focus on the European context, **evidence suggests that its owner is based outside the UK.**

By using the advanced search tool, I manually collected all the posts shared by this account between 4 July and 4 August 2024. The final dataset was comprised of 388 posts. 35 of them reproduced material initially shared by other 23 verified accounts. Some of these accounts had their posts recurrently shared by the X account in question.

Three of identified accounts have over a million followers: an account categorised as "Education" representing an individual who claims to be a "citizen educator"; an account representing an anti-woke activist that has Elon Musk among its followers; and a Hungarian alternative media outlet that hold a golden badge of verification. Six verified accounts had their posts reproduced more than once by the account in question.

Overall, 14 of the 35 posts reproducing material from X verified accounts visually represented racist and Islamophobic conspiracy theories, particularly the great replacement – a conspiracy theory that conveys the belief that **"White European populations are being deliberately replaced at an ethnic and cultural level through immigration and the growth of minority communities"**.

The exploratory analysis of the X verified accounts whose posts were reproduced by the examined account revealed two patterns that warrant further investigation: transnational ties of racial solidarity among self-identified “native” citizens from the UK and other European countries, and an information ecosystem that has exploited the subscription-based verification model to amplify racist and Islamophobic mis/disinformation.

As shown in Figure 1, six of the analysed verified accounts are owned by individuals who claim to be outside the UK – predominantly based in Europe.

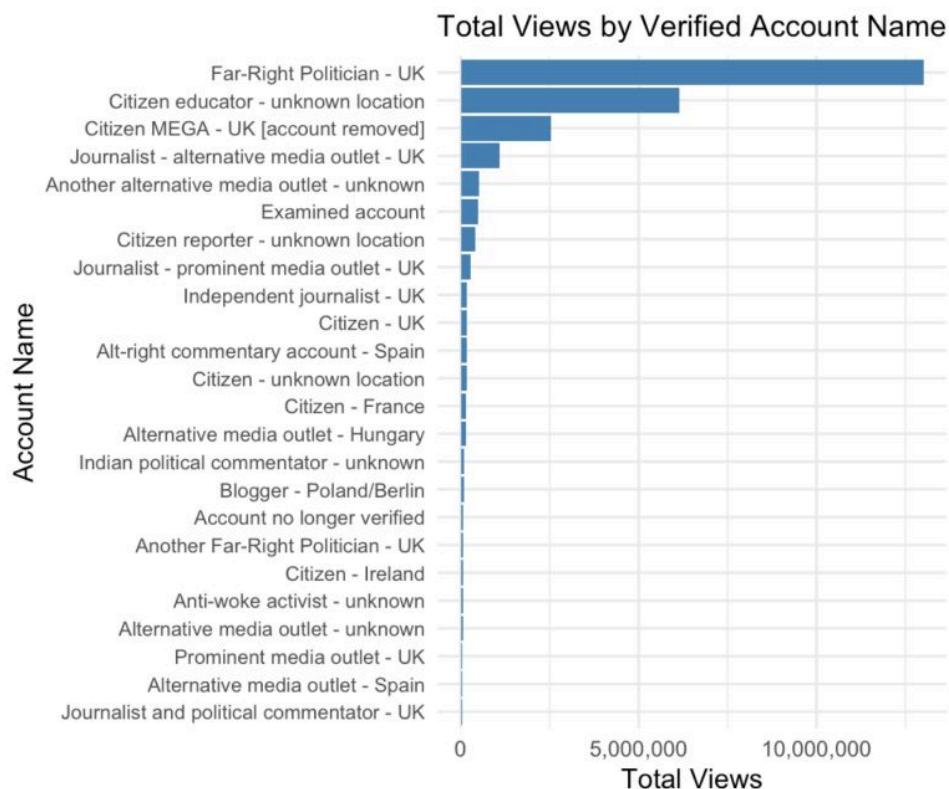


Figure 1. Total views obtained by the posts reproduced from X verified accounts at the time of data collection (between 19 and 26 October 2024).

The commodification of X checkmarks and its impact on democracy and social cohesion

A prominent media outlet based in the UK, professional journalists, citizens claiming to be independent journalists, and alternative media outlets have all benefitted from the blue checkmark to induce the wider public to consume racist and Islamophobic conspiracy theories as truth. In total, nine X accounts that claimed journalistic authority and displayed the blue checkmark either echoed or explicitly promoted racist and Islamophobic conspiracy theories. This pattern reveals that the commodification of X checkmarks has not only amplified mis/disinformation but actively legitimised racist and Islamophobic conspiracy theories by creating false equivalences between alternative and legacy media, as well as between professional and self-proclaimed independent journalists.

Overall, the “pay-for-verification” model has transformed X into a **polarisation engine**, amplifying posts that directly undermine democracy and social cohesion. By paying for X Premium, users not only receive the checkmark without strict identity verification but also **gain access to creator revenue sharing and enhanced reply prioritisation**—features that significantly boost their content’s reach and influence. Although exploratory, my research supports existing studies indicating that while both the platform and X Premium subscribers benefit financially, democracy and society have perished amid rising polarisation and mobilisation to violence.

This post gives the views of the author and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Featured image: Photo by [Sean Robbins](#) on [Unsplash](#)

About the author

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Dr Beatriz Lopes Buarque is a politics scholar and LSE100 Fellow, specialising in the global far right and its politics of conspiratorial truth. Her research explores the intersection of digital capitalism with issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and truth.

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